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SUBJECT: MALDIVES SEEKS "MANAGED CHANGE" AS PARTIES REGISTER

REF: A. COLOMBO 1016

[B](#). COLOMBO 0997

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) To date five organizations have completed the pre-registration process required to become political parties in Maldives. In a June 16 meeting with the Ambassador in Colombo, Maldivian Foreign Secretary Abdul Hamid Zakariyya said that the Government of Republic of Maldives (GORM) is "trying to move as fast as possible" in instituting democratic change without inviting "chaos," but insisted the GORM "is ready to go ahead in good faith." He appealed for U.S. assistance for this effort. On June 14 the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) held a roundtable discussion on democratic change in Maldives at a quasi-governmental institute in Colombo. The GORM has protested to the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) its semi-official sponsorship of the partisan event. Democratic change in Maldives appears to be progressing in fits and starts, but in general the trend seems to be in the right direction. End summary.

FIVE PARTIES COMPLETE PRE-REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

[1](#)2. (U) To date, a total of five organizations have completed pre-registration requirements, as formulated by the Home Ministry, to be recognized as political parties. In addition to the Maldivian People's Party, founded by President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom; the Maldivian People's Democratic Party (heretofore known as the Maldivian Democratic Party, or MDP); and the Islamic Democratic Party (Ref A), headed by former National Security Service (NSS) officer Umar Naseer, applications have also been accepted from the Maldives Labor Party, headed by the vice chairman of the Bodybuilding Federation of Maldives, and the Adalat (Justice) Party, headed by Sheikh Hussein Rahman Hassan. (Note: The leaders of the last three proto-parties appear to be relative newcomers to the political scene, and little is known about them, including among our regular Maldivian contacts. MDP sources, however, were quick to accuse Naseer of torture during his NSS days. End note.) According to Maldivian government officials, the parties are currently canvassing for supporters (3,000 signatures are needed to for full registration), writing their constitutions and composing their manifestos. Maldivian observers expect a few more parties to emerge within the next few months.

[1](#)3. (SBU) In a June 10 meeting, Hussain Shareef, a long-time GORM civil servant, told poloff that he believes Gayoom truly wants democratic change, but is sometimes held back by members of his own family--specifically, brothers Atolls Minister Abdulla Hameed and Trade Minister Yameen--from pursuing those aims. Acknowledging that the appetite for reform in Maldives is great, Shareef said he hopes Gayoom is not deterred from these goals. If he lets himself be swayed, his credibility will suffer greatly with the general public, Shareef said.

GORM PROTESTS SRI LANKAN SEMI-SPONSORSHIP
OF NOT SO WELL-ROUNDED "ROUNDTABLE"

[1](#)4. (SBU) On June 14 the quasi-governmental Bandaranaike Center for International Studies (BCIS) held a "roundtable" discussion in Colombo on democratic change in Maldives. The invitation, which was sent to Colombo diplomats by BCIS in the name of board member and Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, listed Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama as the keynote speaker. The list of participants at the roundtable consisted exclusively of MDP members well known for their anti-Government of Republic of Maldives (GORM) sentiments.

[1](#)5. (SBU) Late in the day June 14 diplomats at the Maldivian High Commission in Colombo made a hasty round of calls to

other diplomats to convey their dissatisfaction at the partisan composition of the "roundtable," their surprise and dismay at the apparent Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) sponsorship of the event, and to poll diplomatic colleagues on their intention to attend. (We sent a political officer. Despite the claims on the invitation, no one from the GSL turned up.) At the event later that evening, MDP representatives stressed the continued need for reform. MDP Chairperson Mohamad Nasheed (who returned to Maldives April 30 to set up the party), predictably castigated President Gayoom as a repressive autocrat who "must go" before true democracy can flourish. Nasheed implored the (sparsely represented) international community to support reforms to democratic processes in Maldives out of a sense of "common human decency." MDP Spokesman Mohamad Latheef commended the U.S. and the EU for their efforts so far to support democracy in Maldives. Latheef also weighed in against Gayoom for spending government funds to promote his own political party. The event garnered little to no press coverage in Sri Lanka.

GORM WANTS CHANGE, NOT CHAOS

6 (SBU) On June 15 Maldivian Foreign Secretary Abdul Hameed Zakariyya, accompanied by Counselor Ghafoor, called on the Ambassador in Colombo. Zakariyya described the Maldivian public as "very happy" with the move to register political parties, asserting that the initiative has "raised President Gayoom's credibility" and "demonstrated his commitment" to reform. The challenge for the GORM now, Zakariyya continued, is "to manage that commitment." To that end, the government is "trying to move as fast as possible without inviting lawlessness, chaos and disorder. We don't want to create dislocation in society." Nonetheless, Zakariyya emphasized, "I am here to assure you that we're ready to go ahead in good faith." Maldivians must change their "mental framework," Ghafoor added. Because of the small size of Maldivian society, "any step we take (in that direction) is huge for us." Zakariyya reported that he had convoked the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in Male' to protest formally the June 14 BCIS event. Zakariyya said he was told that the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs was unaware of the event and he had received assurances that it would more closely monitor the wording of BCIS invitations in the future.

17. (SBU) With its desire to "manage change," Zakariyya said, the GORM needs the "expertise and guidance" of the U.S. Commending the work done by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in assessing Maldives' needs last year (funded by UNDP), he expressed hope that additional funding could be found to bring NDI or a similar organization back to help the reform process. He noted that other institutional reforms, e.g., of the criminal justice system and of the judiciary, are also in train.

18. (SBU) The Ambassador said that the U.S. is encouraged by the direction, in general, in which events are proceeding in Maldives. Noting that many Muslim countries are currently grappling with how to open up their political systems, he said that Maldives could be a wonderful example of a moderate Muslim nation making a successful transition to democracy. He added that "managing" change is quite difficult, especially since recent advancements in information technology make information instantly available. Zakariyya thanked the U.S. for "giving us comfort at a critical time" in Maldivian history.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) The political reform process in Maldives appears to have begun, albeit haltingly. While Gayoom seems to understand the need for change, he wants to control the change, regulating the scope and pace of reform to ward off the "lawlessness, chaos and disorder" he sees as the alternative to his steady hand. Once begun, however, the process of change may be harder to manage than Gayoom and his advisors appreciate. We remain generally hopeful that the trend, despite several false starts, is in the right direction.
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